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Roads, Power, and Schools: A Brighter Future for Bishkek and the Region

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Roads, Power, and Schools: A Brighter Future for Bishkek and the Region

Blaine D. Holt

Abstract

This analysis of U.S. perspectives on Kyrgyzstan centers on the debate that has emerged over seemingly contending objectives of U.S. policy: stability versus democracy, and concludes that they are complementary, not conflicting, goals. In reaching that conclusion, the article traces the combative style of political leadership in Kyrgyzstan since it became independent of the Soviet Union, explains the strategic importance of the country within the region, identifies it as the vital airborne logistic hub for operations in Afghanistan, and makes a telling case for concluding that rebuilding its crumbling infrastructure with U.S. aid and manpower will lead to the development of programs and institutions from which a democracy can evolve.

Kyrgyzstan is on the brink. The small Central Asian nation, long a captive of the Soviet Empire and independent for less than two decades, is literally dissolving as sub-standard roads, bridges, and schools disappear into nature. Whether the analogy is the History Channel's *Life After People* or simply the fading grin of the Cheshire Cat, the country stands at the tipping point.¹ A veritable "alphabet soup" of U.S. agencies buttressed by international partners and donors notwithstanding there is an array of perspectives about positioning Kyrgyzstan onto a positive path.

In looking at the Kyrgyz Republic through a U.S. lens, much of the debate among the various players of the interagency process can be broadly categorized as being between two schools—democracy and stability. Programs designed to support developing democracy are by no means unique to Kyrgyzstan or Central Asia. The language in the latest National Security Strategy (NSS) guides U.S. agencies and departments to place a high premium on advancing our democratic values.² Participation in programs like the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), American University Central Asia (AUCA), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) are prime examples of American foreign policy at work in Bishkek in support of democracy and human rights development.

Through the rise and fall of the Akaev and Bakiev regimes from 1990 to 2010, with Kyrgyzstan confronting ethnic tensions, natural disasters, and the absence of a self-sustaining economy, the United States implemented programs aimed at stability in order to assist in Kyrgyzstan's development. One of the earliest forward bases to enable the progress of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was established at Manas International Airport. Originally dubbed Ganci Airbase, after fallen hero and 9/11 Fire Chief Peter J. Ganci, the military section is now the Transit Center at Manas. It continues to serve as a vital airborne logistics hub for operations in Afghanistan. The Transit Center, which I commanded in 2009–2010, has worked and continues to work

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to assist with stabilization by supporting small infrastructure projects in the Bishkek community. Those projects, aimed at encouraging a deeper relationship with the Kyrgyz hosts, resulted in viewing Americans in a very different light before the end of the cold war.

An excellent example of a stability project that opened up a community to the airmen deployed to Bishkek occurred in the summer of 2009 when we agreed to rebuild a school for nearby Birdik village. In the course of working on the \$670,000 project, it became apparent that the contractor would not complete it in time for the start of the school year. Using the project as an access point, the village mayor accepted the Transit Center's offer to accelerate construction by combining a volunteer labor force of villagers and airmen. By the end of the third work session, the villagers had found great friends in the airmen who were grateful for the trappings of a community while serving so far away from their own. The result was a great success: Kids are being educated in what has been called the best school in Kyrgyzstan. The school now has relationships with sister schools in the United States and is repeatedly visited by the airmen.

The important point in the Kyrgyz example is that the two approaches, long-term democracy development and shorter term stability programs, are complementary and are playing a role in furthering our policy goals and objectives. However the old rule "where you sit is where you stand" applies when looking at interagency relations and what each department's charter could be for the country or region. When priorities are debated with regard to Kyrgyzstan, arguments can usually be distinguished by placing a premium on efforts that espouse U.S. democratic values, respect for human rights, and the rule of law or priorities that are oriented at setting conditions that enable goals such as infrastructure rehabilitation, economic development, and cultural exchange to be embraced. From the perspective of the Transit Center and its objective to become a helpful component of

the Bishkek community, infrastructure projects and medical assistance offered the best avenues of approach to make headway in building lasting partnerships with the Kyrgyz.

Be it foreign aid or economic, military, judicial, public diplomacy, or any other domain, broad consensus among so many bureaucratic cultures is elusive. However, vetting all of the competing perspectives is educational and produces better situational awareness for the entire team. Much was debated about the unique Kyrgyz condition and the optimum combination of ingredients most likely to foster a viable way toward building new (and so far unknown) institutions of a Central Asian version of democracy along with economic prosperity and social stability. As the process of extracting practical and doable projects from lofty goals continued, the Transit Center continued to focus on building the *roads, power, and schools* that could be the "game changers" in Kyrgyzstan.

Despite chronic turmoil the Kyrgyz Republic and its people are a remarkable land and culture. Their history of resilience and survival over many centuries is reason enough not to count them out in terms of evolving in the global community. Lying in the center of Central Asia, this small country is just as important strategically as it was when the Silk Road that passes through it was one of the world's main trade routes. Moving to the present, September 2010 marked 19 years of independence from the old Soviet Union. For all of Kyrgyz, from Batken to Issyk-Kul, however, the commemoration was bitter-sweet as the old Soviet architecture continued to disintegrate, institutions floundered, and basic services eroded.

Of course, there is no shortage of declining states in Central Asia, all laying claim to a share of diminishing global development resources, and the historical U.S. predilection for building democratic prosperity underscores the merit of each narrative. Unfortunately, the Marshall Plan and Bretton Woods are ancient history, and given today's economic

and geopolitical realities, hard choices must be made,³ raising the question why Kyrgyzstan?

A Perilous Independence

The Kyrgyz do not have a tradition of democracy. Their attempts at democratic self-governance near the end of the Soviet Union and postindependence were infused with optimism, as each new regime took power only to collapse in despair as the region's familiar pathologies of greed, corruption, nepotism, and violence sapped each leader's legitimacy and effectiveness. Despite those serial failures, the people have retained a sort of hopeful innocence along with a belief in possibilities for the future of a new national Kyrgyz identity encompassing a leadership role in the region along with a far better life for their children. It is important to note that independence was not sought by the Kyrgyz; it was thrust on them by the Soviet collapse. During the days of empire, the Kyrgyz, existing at the fringes, attracted few resources and little Politburo interest. Broad and passive acceptance of Moscow's authoritarian dominance went unquestioned, and life went on in a sort of cold war backwater. It is not surprising that during the 19 years of independence, repeated crises and failing systems created nostalgia for the old days when every element of Kyrgyz society was controlled in Moscow.

The Kyrgyz never fought for democracy. Shortly after the release from Moscow in 1991, the former Soviet scientist, Askar Akaev, whose ascendancy originated in the Soviet Union's academic ranks, and the newly independent Kyrgyz president turned quickly to the West, seeking assistance in building democratic structures, obtaining access to capital, and opening up the country. In the newly formed state, hopes and optimism were high that the Kyrgyz Republic would be the bright spot and a template for Central Asian nations to join the international community.

International acclaim and praise came to Akaev and the Kyrgyz for boldly liberalizing their economy while the other actors in the region held fast to authoritarianism.⁴ "Island of Democracy" and "Switzerland of Central Asia" were the popular phrases of the day as thousands of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were registering in country to play a part in the tiny nation's rise after 70 years of Soviet domination.⁵ By 1993 the fast pace of reforms attracted just under half a billion dollars in Western-backed assistance.⁶

Akaev's commitment to Kyrgyz's economic prosperity was equaled by his commitment to remain in power. In the first decade of independence, the president made several trade-offs politically. He was able to outmaneuver his political enemies through nepotism, consolidating power, and commissioning questionable investigations leading to opposition leaders' arrests. The rise in corruption and election tampering were harbingers of a shift back toward authoritarianism ostensibly culminating in 2000 when Akaev's clearance to stand for an unconstitutional third term was granted egregiously by a crony judge.⁷ Predictably from 2000 to 2005 poverty jumped, inflation increased, and opposition groups began to include extremist factions like the Islamic Movement Union (IMU). Akaev's administration moved to mute the press and focused public attention on regional tensions. By 2005 the notion of a free and independent Kyrgyz Republic was barely viable. Early in the year the peaceful although hardly constitutional "Tulip Revolution" installed Kurmanbek Bakiyev as leader, and by March 2005 Askar Akaev was in permanent exile in Moscow.⁸

A new election, hailed by international observers as "free and fair," was held very soon after the uprising. The revolution's leader, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, won 89.5 percent of the vote.⁹ Bakiyev, a former electrical engineer and provincial governor, pledged to combat corruption aggressively, which struck a populist cord with the electorate. Enthusiasm returned but

only for the period it took for the proclivities of the quintessential Central Asian “strongman” to emerge. The cycle of nepotism and corruption continued very soon thereafter as many members of the Bakiev family obtained the best jobs in the government amid alarmingly visible interference with the prosecution phase of the corruption trials.

Kyrgyzstan with two billion U.S. dollars in debt and the loss of much foreign investment during the revolution was mired in crisis as the Bakiev era progressed.¹⁰ Included in the long list of casualties from so much capital and investment leaving the new state was infrastructure. Roads, power, and schools, elements that would be essential for Kyrgyzstan’s future, were in decline. The indictments against the Bakiev regime are numerous. The unconstitutional reallocation of power, human rights abuses, unilateral mandates on power tariffs, election fixing, and embezzlement estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars finally brought the regime to a violent end with Bakiev’s fleeing into exile. That the battered and somewhat cynical Kyrgyz electorate retains any hope for the future is nothing short of remarkable.

Rebuilding the infrastructure the way it was before it decayed as a means to restore economic viability and provide the potential to embrace democracy became more elusive than ever by June 2010. *The Joint Economic Assessment: Reconciliation, Recovery & Reconstruction* report (JEA), produced in July 2010 by the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank is a comprehensive look at where the postrevolution Kyrgyz Republic stands today and what it will take to effect a recovery.¹¹ The assessment reports that of 34,720 km of roads, 60 percent need rehabilitation. The energy sector could be a source of hope with incredible potential in hydro-power, but instead of being a net exporter of electricity, the country has failing generation plants that do not provide even sufficient domestic power and

operated with losses that added an estimated \$102M to Kyrgyz debt in 2009. The JEA calculates that the rehabilitation of the existing Kyrgyz power grid without expansion would cost \$120M. They are all indicators that the promise of a brighter future after Soviet domination has yet to be realized. The shortage of schools caused by decay and neglect in accommodating 1.1M primary/secondary school students forces many existing facilities across the country to offer second and third shifts—the only means of attendance for 462,000—a 22 percent increase indicating that more facilities are becoming unsuitable for use.¹² From the April revolution and the ethnic violence in the south that quickly followed in June, Interim President Roza Otunbaeva and her hastily formed government preside over a wounded nation with hundreds dead, thousands injured, millions in infrastructure damage, and looted banks.¹³

Reasons for Optimism?

Whether one is a Kyrgyz citizen or one of a myriad of members from the global community working on Kyrgyz issues, cynicism and skepticism are not in short supply. To be fair, a jaundiced view of the Kyrgyz overcoming the challenges they face is easily justifiable when considering the resources and opportunities squandered since independence. After all, the latest regime change took a 4.6 percent projected growth rate and turned it into an estimated 3.5 percent decrease.¹⁴ The costs to repair and recapitalize Kyrgyzstan continue to climb, and the damage incurred from unrest in June and April raises the bar substantially. Given the strife now pervasive in many economies around the world, a country, region, or global institution betting yet again on the Kyrgyz can be considered only as engaging in a high-risk endeavor.

The overthrow of the Bakiev administration was abrupt, brutal, and entirely preventable.

On April 7, 2010, a day after alarming protests erupted in the remote city of Talas and quickly spread to the capital city, Bishkek, the regime panicked. Soldiers were ordered to fire on the demonstrators, instantly transforming them into revolutionaries, and the country exploded in violence. Longstanding tribal feuds and political rifts set against a background of corruption, resentment, and grinding poverty combined in a lethal mix fueled by foreign interests eager to gain strategic advantage. Power was wrested from the dictatorship and handed over to an “ad hoc” group of opposition members nominally led by a most unusual politician, Roza Otunbaeva, and supported by former Kyrgyz generals intent on restoring order. The interim leader endures criticism from across the spectrum as lacking audacity and resolve—many have attributed the magnitude of the ethnic violence in June to frailties in her leadership.¹⁵ Although there may be reason to attribute weakness to her, there is also strong evidence to conclude that Ms. Otunbaeva will ultimately prevail and save Kyrgyzstan. In a very short amount of time, born of violent upheaval, she has

- unified a coalition of opposition leaders who were formerly political enemies
- successfully reached out to the international community for assistance
- restored a modicum of government services
- pushed a referendum on a new constitution decentralizing power from the president to the parliament
- legitimized the interim government
- scheduled parliamentary elections for October 2010.

Roza Otunbaeva’s early speeches on human rights, democratic reform, and securing a brighter future for the Kyrgyz people struck

a nerve across the country. Although the previous regimes also began with talk of liberalization and freedom, her reputation as an honest stateswoman engendered immediate respect, and the Kyrgyz accepted her as their leader despite the chaos of the day. The constitutional referendum, which seemed doomed because of the concurrent violence on Osh and Jalalabad, passed with a resounding 90 percent “yes” vote.¹⁶ She inspired confidence from across the international spectrum as evidenced by nations and institutions bringing resources to bear to ease the suffering in the immediate future and offering plans to reverse the republic’s downward spiral. Her term as president was established with an automatic expiration date of December 2011, and she has agreed to the condition that she will not stand for reelection.¹⁷ Further, she has not wavered from her drive for reforms, nor has she machinated in the self-serving behaviors of Akaev or Bakiev. As the long dead George III was heard to remark to his portrait painter when hearing of General Washington’s plans to retire and turn his back on power after 1783: “If he does that, he will be the greatest man in the world.” Perhaps Roza Otunbaeva will turn her lack of traditional Asian “strongman” characteristics into virtues and become the surprising and accidental mother of her country.

If she is to be successful, however, Kyrgyzstan will need to increase output and what it offers the world. In 2008, 28 percent of the republic’s GDP comprised remittances flowing back to the country from migrant Kyrgyz labor working in other countries.¹⁸ Four fifths of the remittances come from laborers based in Russia.¹⁹ Kyrgyz exports comprised mostly of commodities such as metals and crops declined by nearly 28 percent from 2009 to 2010.²⁰ Instability and violence were involved in the plunge, and recovering the predominantly agrarian economy will require substantial investments. The Kyrgyz themselves have demonstrated that they do want to succeed regardless of the past. Farmers and traders still navigate

treacherous roads to bring whatever they can to market. Families continue to carve out livings despite rolling blackouts and the brutal winter nights. School is still taught even if the only building available has gaping holes and no power or the only time slot for lessons is in the middle of the night. There is a resilience in the Kyrgyz that is difficult to quantify, but it may be found in their very tough history as a nomadic people surviving everything associated with roaming the Mongolian Steppe. The best illustration (and one witnessed by the writer) came from Bakyt, a 19-year-old Kyrgyz youth who was proud of his bullet wounds. While lying in a Kyrgyz hospital bed the day after the massacre in Ala Too Square and after lowering his blood-stained shirt on a hole made by a 7.62 mm AK 74 round, he said, "I am proud; our country will be all right; now we will have a bright future." His view was echoed by every patient in the overpopulated ward. Kyrgyzstan has every symptom of "failing" except for the courage of its citizens.

Why Kyrgyzstan and Why Now?

Kyrgyzstan and the region are as strategically important today as they were during the "Great Game" period of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan as close-by neighbors surrounding the small nation, there is no shortage of rationales directed toward producing stability in the Kyrgyz Republic and the region as a whole. Security issues have plagued this region. None of the Central Asian nations has strong militaries or great capabilities to enforce their borders, enabling drug and human trafficking in addition to freedom of movement for transnational groups allied to Al Qaeda such as IJU (previously mentioned), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Hizbut Tehrir (HT).

As the United States works to stabilize Afghanistan and embark on a slow departure of forces from the region, leaving Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia in disarray could result in a region ripe to replace Afghanistan and Pakistan as the most hospitable base for terrorist organizations of all stripes. The southern half of Kyrgyzstan especially is fertile ground for extremism and has proven to be a huge challenge for the interim government's efforts at stabilization. Isolation and rampant poverty are potent ingredients for recruiting young males into lives of terrorism. Another destabilizing complication is the alarming exodus of 18–35-year-olds altogether. Between 2004 and 2008, more than 800,000 men and women left the country to work abroad, making foreign remittances the cornerstone of the GDP.²¹ Ultimately that cycle will force Kyrgyzstan to be reliant on foreign assistance. Ahmed Rashid, Pakistan's famed reporter, argues, in his book *Descent into Chaos*, that the United States should not limit its nation-building efforts to programs on Pakistan and Afghanistan; he warns that the entire Central Asian region is susceptible to the same threat faced in Afghanistan.²² His concerns are valid; foreign funding has given rise to the construction of fundamentalist mosques and madrassas in southern Kyrgyzstan.²³ In villages where schools are nonexistent, it is difficult to refuse any group wanting to build an educational facility no matter what the underlying agenda is. Rashid strongly advocates for a Marshall Plan for the region.²⁴

A failed state in Kyrgyzstan would have the potential to destabilize neighbors such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the same ends. Setting aside the human catastrophe that can be anticipated by complete anarchy, the security interests of the big powers in the region, namely Russia and China, would be imperiled. Their interests were underscored by nearly simultaneous statements by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to

commit security forces and equipment deployed on the southern Kyrgyz borders to aid in stabilizing the region by interdicting terrorists and the drug trade. That response was immediate in the wake of the September 20, 2010, IMU attacks in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe.²⁵

Ironically, in what could be interpreted as an initiative to bring the Kyrgyz closer to regional partners while distancing themselves from the United States, the interim government announced in August that it was pulling back from security initiatives focused on countering terror and drugs and providing international policing.²⁶ That decision raises the question of whether the time is right to review U.S. engagement strategy for Kyrgyzstan and the region.

American Equities in Kyrgyzstan

Shortly after 9/11, the Kyrgyz permitted the use of Manas International Airport for coalition operations in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Since that time the significance of the American–Kyrgyz relationship has grown. For all of the negotiations, renegotiations, and efforts to maintain access to that critical logistics hub, the last nine years of increased U.S. engagement has created numerous opportunities for cooperation with and assistance to the Kyrgyz. The embassy staff has grown over this time, formulating programs generally aimed at supporting the relatively new republic's efforts to build democratic institutions, institute the rule of law, improve governance, and foster respect for human rights. A stable Kyrgyzstan on its way to democratic reforms, liberty for its citizens, and free market capitalism would be congruent with American interests and the global community. A successful Kyrgyz Republic would be ideally positioned to take a leadership role in partnering with its neighbors in matters of

trade, border security, countering terror, and countering drugs. Though foreign assistance makes sense from a U.S. perspective, care must be taken to balance long-term aspirations (institutional democracy) against short-term requirements (roads, power, schools). To become a sustainable democratic global power, the Kyrgyz Republic will have to go about re-engineering its economy from one in which remittances and bountiful growing seasons are indispensable to one that is attractive to business and innovation. A state that achieves the latter vision is not only self-sustaining but costs the United States and its global partners far less than the former in terms of foreign assistance resources. The credibility of America's commitments and resolve around the globe depends on seeing the Kyrgyz through the fragile transition period. The bilateral relationship might have taken on a special priority because of OEF basing needs, but in the nine years since 9/11, U.S. relations have grown across a variety of domains. The United States stands to benefit from demonstrating strong support long after OEF needs pass, much the same way it did in nurturing relationships with nations born out of World War II. Since the revolution in April, the United States has pushed a great deal of additional assistance, with \$48M going into the JEA, \$21M of which was ready for immediate dispersal after the Donor's Conference in July.²⁷ The president just released \$5M to support the October parliamentary elections and has also asked Congress for an additional \$42M for 2011.²⁸ That is in addition to the millions that go to the Kyrgyz treasury for continued access to Manas International Airport for OEF and the herculean humanitarian efforts embarked on by the airmen who work there. Those recent investments underscore the equities that the United States has in terms of financial investments already made and the prospect of achieving strategic outcomes worthy of pursuing in partnership with the Kyrgyz.

Joining the Global Effort: Assuming a Leadership Role

The United States has partnered with a diverse group of state and institutional actors from the region and beyond. In addition to the infrastructure sectors mentioned, the JEA has identified more than \$1.1 B in requirements to reconstruct Kyrgyzstan across a broad spectrum of portfolios from bolstering institutions and governance to infrastructure and economic development. In broad terms the plan will address

- Kyrgyz budget gap in 2010: \$335 M
- Social sector requirements: \$334 M
- Infrastructure support: \$350 M.

The plan calls for the entire amount to be obligated within 30 months, \$96 M of which should be immediately executed via the UN Flash Appeal program and \$671 M required within the first six months.²⁹ More than a third of the amount identified in the JEA supports reconciliation and reconstruction efforts resulting from the violence in Osh and Jalalabad in June.³⁰ In the infrastructure section of the assessment, \$130 M is for rebuilding destroyed buildings from the events of April and Osh. The majority of the \$180 M targeted to energy infrastructure is to make urgent repairs to existing stations to prepare for the 2010–2011 winter. That pares the \$350 M in the infrastructure down to \$40 M for investment in the transportation sector (roads).³¹ The JEA, investing \$1.1 B in Kyrgyz reconciliation and reconstruction after the revolution and violence in the south, is ambitious but nonetheless leaves important requirements uncovered. Key investments that can ensure that the bold strategy of the JEA succeeds are

- A road network that unites the country, enabling the flow of goods, services, and ideas

- A power grid surpassing Kyrgyz needs and occupying a meaningful percentage of the GDP
- A school system that creates in the next generation the country's leaders and labor force.

The United States has joined the international effort and continues to make substantial contributions to execute the programs in the JEA. U.S. agencies also continue to make progress on prodemocracy programs that have been in place for many years. A leadership opportunity is emerging, and the United States could be in a unique position to seize it.

By reorienting and applying resources to infrastructure needs the United States can occupy a very visible space in the Kyrgyz community. Bolstering efforts of complementary nongovernmental organizations or investing in meaningful institutions like America University Central Asia (AUCA) or the National Democratic Institute (NDI) is important but much less visible to the citizenry as a whole. One example of visibility in the community is the distinctive-looking yellow metro buses that service Bishkek. Those new vehicles are easily discernible from the older, Russian buses and trams. On the sides of the buses are large, conspicuous signs with the Chinese flag and the statement "A gift from the Chinese people." The United States has done a lot for the Kyrgyz nation and can expand on successes by taking a leadership role in the community by addressing infrastructure needs in ways that are visible to the population. Branding, such as the Chinese example, is important, but direct human interaction is more powerful. Americans actually repairing the infrastructure alongside the Kyrgyz like the example painted in the introduction can be a powerful force in shaping how Kyrgyz society views Americans.

Two assets are already in Kyrgyzstan that could be used to personalize American development assistance more so than they already do: Airmen who work at the Transit Center and

the Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) whose number nearly doubled over the last year could form a useful volunteer core of assistance. Having personnel resources present in a place where U.S. foreign policy objectives are so important constitutes a rare opportunity to put an American “face” on aid dispensed at a local level. Microinvestments that enable such groups to engage and work with the public at the local level such as roofing a school where Kyrgyz and Americans provide the labor or PCVs canvassing villages with mayors to determine which roads would make the most meaningful impact are powerful ways to rise above the cynical cliché of “just throwing money at it.” Through the JEA the global community has decidedly made a bet on the future of Kyrgyzstan. The United States would do well to assume the mantle of leadership in helping to change the narrative of the last 19 years.

Policymakers who have spent careers watching Kyrgyzstan’s attempts at stability and democracy in the post-Soviet era are no doubt analyzing the current situation in the country and asking how this time will be any different from the rise of Akaev or Bakiev. Healthy skepticism is warranted. After all, many of the leaders across the Kyrgyz Republic were in positions of stature in one or both of the previous administrations. Roza Otunbaeva is no exception, but her résumé as a diplomat and foreign minister leaves her with a very different experience base from which to formulate her perspectives on the Kyrgyz Republic’s future. In Soviet days she worked at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and served as ambassador to Malaysia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Her opportunities to observe the global system are in sharp contrast with Akaev’s academic and Bakiev’s engineering credentials in the Soviet Union. Her drive to reestablish order in the republic as the first Kyrgyz woman president was lauded by President Obama at their recent bilateral

meeting on September 24, 2010, during the UN General Assembly.³² From a democratic values standpoint, she is a much more suitable partner for the United States to work with than previous regimes.

What Does Success Look Like?

If the oppressive actions of past regimes, which culminated in spectacular displays of bloodshed, destruction, and human suffering in the late spring of 2010, give birth to a new reality and the promise of a better future for Kyrgyzstan, then those who have suffered during the 19 years of the republic’s independence will be honored as patriots. A \$1.1 B international assistance plan and millions beyond that indicate that there is a global consensus on Kyrgyzstan’s strategic importance. The results on which all of those plans seem to be based are reconciling and reconstructing the Kyrgyz Republic while supporting institutions and programs in the hope that a democracy will emerge. An understanding of the Kyrgyz condition is critical to reach those ends. Most Kyrgyz, especially the young who have no active memory of life in the Soviet Union, would agree that democracy and human rights are goals that are desired for the republic’s future. However, all Kyrgyz understand that achieving those goals will be difficult if their economy, based on remittances and international assistance, is not reformed. The international community has established programs to encourage the rule of law and contractual enforcement in the hope that domestic and foreign enterprises will flourish. Even when those hurdles have been crossed, the immediate investment in roads, power, and schools as foundations to economic sustainability as well as fulfilling U.S. engagement goals for the country and the region will be necessary to implement the grand plan expressed by the JEA.

A stable, economically viable Kyrgyzstan emerging in the world as a role model in the region, a model that is able to secure its borders while promoting unity among its diverse ethnicities, is what success looks like. For those who play pivotal roles in helping the Kyrgyz move onto a path that leads to that end state, a stalwart ally in Central Asia exists and can be even more helpful if the aid is delivered at a personal level. Success in the Kyrgyz Republic will be welcome news in all of the Central Asian capitals as well as China, Russia, and Afghanistan. On an economic level only, the spider web network of roads and rail lines that surrounds the old Silk Road could enable economic gains that all of the regional players would benefit from. Consider Bishkek's ideal location, which is at the center of it all. A vibrant road, rail, and air hub could be an intermodal distribution center that serves Central Asia and beyond, much the same way as Chicago and St. Louis grew economically as the United States developed in the nineteenth century.

Stability and Bishkek's and the region's progress as seen on an upward vector would make a coalition drawdown and the eventual departure of military forces from the region a relatively safer proposition for those forces and all of Central Asia, from Kabul to Ashgabat, than it would now. Prosperity and stability in Kyrgyzstan would represent a very inhospitable environment for IMU, IJU, and any fleeing enemy elements from Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Otunbaeva's interim government has reached out to the world to pursue a brighter future, and even though a historic effort is getting under way to answer that call, the ultimate solution lies with the citizens themselves. The Kyrgyz, a hearty people whose nomadic roots date to 201 BC and have been tested by brutal terrain, unforgiving climates, and conquering armies throughout history, may well be facing their most daunting trial yet—saving their nation.

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